



TOOWOOMBA BIRD OBSERVERS inc.

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MEMBERSHIP : Adults/Families \$18 Students \$10

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'To encourage the observations and study of the birds of the Toowoomba area'

NEWSLETTER No. 220 - MAY 1994

EDITORIAL:

What great birding weather at the moment. Could it be that there are more Black-shouldered Kites around at present? My wife and I saw a single bird and then a pair sitting near a nest at Gowrie not far north-west of Toowoomba. I rang the property owner after returning home and he suggested the nest was an old crow's nest. Perhaps someone can enlighten me as to whether kites are into re-cycling.

This newsletter has enough variety to please most tastes and a big thankyou to all the authors. Starting with the April Outing Report, we move on to Musk Ducks, Pat McConnell's secret to successful birding, Nicci's favourite Winter Visitor, Anne's Naturesearch Report and a New Bird Report by raptor fancier Rod Hobson.

TBO OUTING - Lake Broadwater, via Dalby, 26 April 1994

What aspects of birdwatching are most enjoyable? Some might say the birds you see; others the places you visit. There are those who love "talking birds" with kindred spirits and those who would vote for the therapeutic benefits of forgetting about EVERYTHING in one's hectic, cluttered life bar the next bird. Certainly, our April outing smacked of all these qualities and more!

An amazing twenty-two people took part! While awaiting arrivals, some of us tried in vain to locate a Musk Lorikeet amidst the hordes of other lorikeets. Surprisingly, Musks have not been recorded there. A walk along the Wilga Track produced plenty of species and an abundance of Striped Honeyeaters, Little and Noisy Friarbirds, a solitary Spiny-cheeked Honeyeater, Red-winged Parrots, Broad-tailed Thornbills and Brown Goshawk. Large flocks of Plumed Whistling-Ducks wheeled over the lake. On the water, we were treated to a long overdue sighting (at least for me) of the Hoary-headed Grebes, its diagnostic salt and pepper "wig" with black nape clearly visible. An interesting observation was a Split Jack *Capparis lasiantha* bush with barely a leaf unchewed - the culprits were soon found despite having gone to considerable trouble to alter their appearance - every stem was lined with chrysalises of the Caper White butterfly!! Apparently, Wild Orange *Capparis mitchellii* is the usual

target of the Caper White in the area.

In the lake's backwaters, trusty telescopes were trained on several more species including Pink-eared Duck, Australasian Shoveler, Glossy Ibis, and nesting Black Swans. While some preferred the traditional ground-level vantage point at the lake's edge, others took advantage of the impressive bird-hide - a spacious, lofty structure about the height of a double storey house, which gave waterbird watching a whole new slant - literally! I must admit that, after years of observing from the ground, I found this new perspective difficult to adjust to. Something I'm sure I'd conquer in a hurry come mid-Summer or a downpour!

The day was blessed with raptors too. En route, a young Spotted Harrier cruised over a field before disappearing into it. At Lake Broadwater, a pair of Wedge-tails flaunted their majesty and an Australian Hobby dazzled us with high-speed, havoc-raising forays into the local avifauna. Sightings of Whistling Kite and White-bellied Sea-Eagle capped off the list.

Lake Broadwater was a new site for me and I was impressed with its undeniable birding prospects. I will return!! It was also very satisfying to be greeted and guided around by a local tribe as big as our own. Many thanks to Malcolm and Marjorie Wilson and company for their help and hospitality, including access to the museum. Please allow us to reciprocate by showing you around our area sometime.

Michael Atzeni

PROFILE - Pat Mc Connell

Recently our ex-president, Pat, attained his 600th species sighting. At our behest, he has kindly revealed his birding philosophy and his most memorable experiences. Over to Pat :-

List Used: - I base my list on the Australian Birders Association List. This list is slightly out of date but no comprehensive list has been made since. Some species have been lumped together and others removed.

Period: - I have been birding since 1975 when Terry Reis and I shared a pair of binoculars.

Favourite Groups: - Owls, hawks and button-quails but grasswrens are also very special.

Most memorable trip: - Lord Howe Island. The scenery is great and the birds so tame. You can also have great views of sea birds without spending long hours on a rocking boat.

Most memorable moments: - With Lesley Beaton when she discovered the Red-necked Phalarope at Hood's Lagoon and when I was at the Number 2 Bore at Bedourie during a Long-haired Rat *Rattus villosissimus* plague. I was sitting in the bath tub (the world's biggest!) with rats sitting on the side of the bath with Letter-winged Kites hovering over my head in a magnificent red sky.

Unconquered: - As yet I haven't been to Darwin, northern Western Australia or Tasmania so I still may be able to add a few species to my list.

Top 10: - It constantly changes every time I try. In no particular order they are :- Red Goshawk, Black-breasted Button quail, Palm Cockatoo, Orange-bellied Parrot, Sooty Owl, Powerful Owl, Rufous Owl, Red-bellied Pitta, Grey Grasswren and the Blue-faced Finch.

Longest Twitch: - A five hour trip to see the Regent Honeyeater. Friends of mine have driven from Brisbane to Cairns for a weekend or flown from Melbourne to Darwin to view a single bird. However I'm not a huge fan of "Twitching for twitching's sake".

My philosophy: - Find your own birds, as twitching is not everything, although I am happy to have seen 600 species. Everyone has been shown birds by someone else but it is very important to put in the time and find your

in birds and places to go birding. This places the birds in some kind of perspective; for example - it took me many years to see my first Sooty Owl and to me it will always be special. However if on my first birding trip I had been shown this bird I doubt if I would have appreciated it as much. Read the books and field guides and find the birds yourself. This is birding at its most enjoyable.

MUSK DUCKS at STORM KING DAM

Over Easter, Diana and I were at Girraween National Park (where we DID see the Yellow Tufted Honeyeater, but DIDN'T see the Chestnut-rumped Hylacola nor the Superb Lyrebird) and did a little drive around to Storm King Dam on our way to Stanthorpe one day.

Diana spotted the first Musk Duck about the middle of the dam, and we watched it diving and surfacing for many minutes. It was a male, with its "curious large leathery flap under bill". At first there was no sign of a stiff tail. It was bringing what looked like water weed to the surface, but there might have been yabbies in the bits of weed. Later we saw two more of these curious ducks, this time a female as well as well as another male. The female did have her stiff tail vertical on occasions.

When we looked back at our first bird, he had given up feeding and was preening. He did this for ten to fifteen minutes, rubbing his head against his back, then standing upright in the water while he splashed busily, the splashing continuing as he returned to the horizontal. His tail appeared now and then.

There were a few Black Ducks about, especially a family party (some looked smaller than the leader, we thought), a few Straw-necked Ibis and Masked Lapwings on the far bank, with a few cormorants at the northern end, so we were especially pleased to see these Musk Ducks, not often seen by us.

Gloria Glass

WINTER VISITOR

The bird I most readily associate with autumn and winter in suburban Toowoomba is the Willie Wagtail. "Strange," you are possibly thinking, "Willie Wagtails are ubiquitous in most habitats and in all seasons. " - but not in my street.

Each year in April a single Willie Wagtail appears in our neighbourhood. The appearance of this small creature has become so regular that its chirruping one crisp autumn morning is tantamount to an official announcement that Autumn now holds sway with Winter waiting in the wings. It becomes a regular feature of the neighbourhood for four or five months - calling from the bare branches of deciduous trees, strutting and flouncing along the tops of sunny brick walls, pursuing insects across the lawns, flirting with the sprinkler systems and teasing the local cats, who never fail to respond to the small black and white devil dancing tantalizingly forever beyond the reach of twitching paws and quivering jaws. Come September, the Willie Wagtail is gone.

I am not imagining this phenomenon either. When I became aware of the pattern, I checked personal records for this neighbourhood. Between early April and late August each year I have recorded regular sightings of one Willie Wagtail. Between early September to March I do not have a single record of a Willie Wagtail sighting for this area.

These visits don't appear to happen in the more rural suburbs. You can visit Withcott, Kingsthorpe, Wyreema or Highfields, in any season you choose and you can find whole families of Willie Wagtails on farm fences and riding on the backs of local animals.

The best explanation that I have been able to devise is that the rural areas are the preferred habitats and

territories held by nesting pairs of mature birds who raise their broods during Spring and Summer. With the onset of the cooler weather, the youngsters are forced to depart in search of their own territories and so in April a young bird arrives here to establish a territory in a less favourable habitat.

What of last Winter's visitor? Perhaps it grew too cocksure and the cat which it had teased so relentlessly all winter finally had its revenge. There are numerous hazards for young birds in an urban environment which can make it a less than desirable territory.

This Autumn the single Willie Wagtail arrived on 14 April and as I type is calling from the trees in the front garden. Has anyone out there noticed a similar pattern?

Nicci Thompson, Toowoomba

NATURESEARCH UPDATE

To mark the end of the initial two year period in South-east Queensland, the Naturesearch Team invited volunteers to a search and BBQ/Picnic at the Mapleton Falls National Park on Saturday 23 April. At least 70-80 searchers (among them Dana McCown and I) turned up for all or part of the day at this beautiful location in the Blackall Ranges to enjoy a sociable gathering in the rainforest park.

Coming from Toowoomba, the country appeared much greener with lush foliage everywhere indicative of the much higher rainfall. Here Jean (Project Co-ordinator), Liz (Database), Ian and Adrian (Project Field Survey Team) greeted arrivals and Jan (Administration) set up her kitchen. Volunteers from other regions met long-lost friends and made new ones whilst setting up their own picnic sites on the grass.

People filtered in and out of the clearing as they explored the immediate rainforest where birds could be seen flitting high in the canopy; checked Pencil Creek above the Falls for frogs and other aquatic life or gazed at butterflies fluttering out of reach in the warm sunlight. Jean summoned the scattered searchers in order to organize them into groups according to their special interests; bird watchers under this tree; butterfly enthusiasts under that and so on; allotting an expert to each group and sending them off. It was hard to choose. Should it be frogs or reptiles, plants or butterflies? But birds won and we set off along the forest path; dark and damp below the canopy of palms and magnificent forest giants.

Grey and Rufous Fantails, Lewin's Honeyeaters, Eastern Yellow Robins, Satin Bowerbirds, Little Shrike-thrushes, and White-browed and Large-billed Scrubwrens were among those we glimpsed while the calls of Fan-tailed Cuckoos, Whipbirds, Brown Thornbills, White-throated Treecreepers tempted us to search new areas and sometimes be rewarded with a sighting. Our ramble continued through the more open eucalypt woodland and brought us back via the palms with the sound of the waterfall close-by.

Great activity was taking place in Jan's kitchen where tables laden with delicious-looking salads were set out and enticing smells came from the barbeque. With appetites whetted by the fresh air and exercise, it was time to attend to one's inner needs, as many of those present had breakfasted and set forth at an early hour. Contented scenes of munching, drinking and chatting ensued until little remained of the feast. A large Lace Monitor and Brush Turkey appeared hoping to sample the remains but were somewhat overawed by the large company nearby and retired to the safety of the forest.

Jean once more spoke to the assembled volunteers and thanked them for their efforts over the two years and to present certain people who had given an immense amount of their time special tokens of appreciation. Formalities over, more walks were proposed but for us the search was done. A lovely day when threatening clouds had blown away and a happy atmosphere and good companionship were enjoyed by all.

Anne Shore, Shorelands

NEW TOOWOOMBA BIRD :

NO.279

SOOTY OWL *Tyto tenebricosa*

Time/Date : 5:30 p.m. EST / 04.11.93
Place : Redwood Park, Toowoomba.
Observers : C.Dollery, R.Hobson, P.McConnell
Optics : "Zeiss" 10 x 40 B binoculars
 "Zeiss" 8 x 30 binoculars
 "Carton" 20 x 70 telescope
Weather Conditions : warm to hot, slight breeze, good visibility.
Distance to Subject : variable, closest view at 8 - 10 metres.

Comments : During spotlighting operations by the above mentioned observers on the night of 02.11.93 a continual rasping call, suspected as being that of a begging owlet, was heard coming from a hollow high in a Queensland Blue Gum *Eucalyptus tereticornis*. Observers were unable to obtain positive identification of the species on that occasion as the caller remained unsighted despite efforts. (Juveniles of the Masked Owl *T. novaehollandiae* were known to make similar calls. That species had been sighted in Redwood Park several times previously).

On the afternoon of 04.11.93 whilst crossing a lantana choked gully near the approaches to the suspect tree, a female Sooty Owl was flushed from low down in the ground cover vegetation. She flew for approximately 10 metres before temporarily alighting, allowing a positive identification. The bird then flew off and disappeared down a heavily vegetated gully. On nightfall she returned by a somewhat circuitous route and entered the limb hollow whereat she began a continual harsh calling which remained unanswered for the several hours that the observers were in attendance.

This situation was repeated on several later visits with one variation. At dusk, 13.11.93, Hobson and McConnell heard a series of short trilling calls from deep in the park in answer to the female's continual rasping calls. We believe this was the reply call of the male Sooty Owl, but the bird remained unsighted. Subsequent sightings of a bird were obtained as it roosted in the limb hollow entrance, on the outside of same hollow and in closeby vegetation. Both daytime and nocturnal observations were made. The positive proof of successful breeding was never substantiated, a very difficult conclusion to be arrived at as juveniles of the species are virtually indistinguishable from adults in the field.

At the time of writing (April 1994) the bird/s have quit the nesting (?) hollow and it is not known if the species persists in the area. Considering the species' status and the vulnerability of breeding (?) birds to human disturbance, the decision was made by the Records Officer not to advertise the existence of the owl/s generally. This decision was arrived at after lengthy discussions between the persons concerned and by consultation by the Records Officer with the relevant authority viz. Mr Greg Czechura, State Co-ordinator, Australasian Raptor Association and Queensland Museum.

Similar Species : It is unlikely that this owl can be confused with other *Tyto*'s. Hobson and McConnell have had prior experience with the species.

Records Officer
18.04.94

**** COMING EVENTS ****

May Outing :

Location: Lockyer Wetlands
Date: 29/05/94
Leader: Nicci Thompson (076) 343 074
Time: 7 a.m.

Meet at Lake Apex at Gatton. BYO everything.

mid-June Outing

Location: Helidon, Postman's Ridge, Lockyer Siding
Date: 12 June
Leader: Michael Atzeni (076) 392 761
Time: 7 a.m.

Meet at the Helidon Rest Area. Plenty of bush birds around at present including the likes of White-bellied Cuckoo-shrike, Western Gerygone, Brown-headed Honeyeater, Crested Shrike-tit and, if we're lucky, Painted Button-Quail and Red-capped Robin.

June Outing

Location: Girraween campout
Date: 25/26 June
Leader: Don Gaydon (07) 822 1684

Always a great place to visit. For those wishing to go Sunday only, meet 9 a.m. at the ranger's office. Those wishing to camp will need to arrange a permit. More in next newsletter.

If undeliverable return to
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